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ABSTRACT

Hans-Georg Gadamer proposes a philosophical hermeneutics that sheds light on the ways in which scholars have envisioned the history of teaching writing. Offering an alternative to a linear model of history, in which events are viewed as links in a chain, Gadamer's hermeneutics regards a text as a locus or web through which other texts are continuously woven. In this model, the historian is asked to work speculatively rather than prescriptively, attending to the way in which a text suggests, argues with, comments on, or even omits other texts. Over recent years, attempts to understand composition and its theory and practice have arranged themselves into three distinct patterns: (1) works that revitalize the discipline by preserving teaching practices and theories informed by Greco-Roman influences; (2) texts that authorize composition studies based on the work of empirical and theoretical research; and (3) accounts that focus on aspects of institutional theory--handbook usage and textbook publication trends. Gadamer's model presents a network or frame with which to read and evaluate these narrative accounts of the field. It shows, for instance, that Edward P. J. Corbett's attempt to make a case for classical rhetoric on the grounds of a continuity between antiquity and the present depends on his exclusion of expressive rhetorics from his narrative. It also shows that Albert R. Kitzhaber's study of college writing programs excludes many of the bread and butter issues composition programs were struggling with at that time. (TB)

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Hermeneutic Inquiry and the Possibilities for Composition History

Underscoring the importance of continued historical inquiry in composition studies, Robert Connors writes

> [I]f our methods can grow more solid and sophisticated our motives should not. The methods are not new . . . the effort there is to wield them with more control, more self-awareness. But our motives for writing history are what such motives have always been: we write histories to define ourselves. ("Dreams and Play" 35)

Connors' assessment illustrates up how continued efforts to narrativize our discipline have worked to authorize composition studies, legitimizing it as a field by uncovering, reclaiming, and making a space for the voices of its members. Significant, too, is the way in which this inquiry has allowed us to see the social nature of writing instruction. That is, in recognizing our own historicity as culturally and politically defined writers, we have, in turn, come to realize how the teaching of writing is necessarily implicated in the production and preservation of cultural, economic, and ideological value systems.

My project here is to draw on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer in order to propose a hermeneutic model of writing composition histories. Rather than viewing historical events as links in a chain, a hermeneutic model regards a text as a locus or web through which other texts are continuously woven.

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This methodology would extend our notion of what might count as an interpretable text and point up a document's intertextual character. A hermeneutic investigation then ultimately endorses a new way of reading. That is, the historian is asked to work speculatively rather than prescriptively, attending to the way in which a text suggests, argues with, comments upon, or even omits other texts. Finally, the historian's interpretative presence within a text may be seen as a positive value in a hermeneutic model, for it invites and encourages multiple interpretations.

Within the last two decades, composition studies has been marked by increasing attempts to situate our discipline and to frame the state of its theory and practice. Despite a multiplicity of foci and approaches, these historical accounts seem to arrange themselves into three distinct narrative patterns: works which revitalize the discipline by preserving teaching practices and theories informed by Greco-Roman influences; texts which authorize composition studies based on the work of empirical and theoretical researchers; and accounts which focus on aspects of institutional history--handbook usage, textbook publication trends, the impact of nineteenth-century rhetorical models.

What we are presented with, then, are multiple histories of composition--all contributing to the field's knowledge base, all motivated by the need to define who we are. What is equally important as the proliferation of these narratives, however, is the creation of a network or frame against which to read the

histories we compose. Such a frame would provide us with an evaluative stance toward our narratives as well as a means to contextualize the political, economic, and cultural agendas which underpin them.

I will argue that existing histories of composition--whether they locate composition in light of past, future, or contemporary movements--tend to depict the field's history as a seamless chain of events. Indeed, these histories' positions as dominant discourses are predicated upon and sustained by their ability to exclude contradictions, forge causal links, and silence disruptive voices. Furthermore, such modes often do not account for the way in which power signifies and constitutes their practices.

As an example of how a hermeneutic model might work, I wish to examine three texts written during the 1960s, texts which were not written as explicit "histories," but ones which have come to be regarded as benchmark documents of our field: Edward P. J. Corbett's Classical Rhetoric and the Modern Student (1965), Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer's Research in Written Composition (1963), and Albert R. Kitzhaber's Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College (1963). I wish to demonstrate how a hermeneutic reading of these texts--each a representative example from one of the dominant narrative patterns--opens up the possibility for alternative readings of our discipline that extend beyond the constraints of a strictly classical, research, or naturalistic account. I wish

to show how the intertextual character of each document suggests others which have been omitted, provoked disruptions, or presented contradictions to the privileged narrative, thus inviting us to recontextualize those documents we hold as canonical.

As a historical document, Corbett's Classical Rhetoric is noteworthy because it presents the first attempt to provide the student of writing with a programmatic approach to composition combined with a history of the discipline from antiquity to the present time. From the standpoint of composition pedagogy, it redirects writing instructors' attention away from concern for grammatical fluency and modal approaches to writing, laying some of the initial groundwork for considering composing as a process.

Corbett tries to make a case for the efficacy of classical rhetoric by establishing a bridge of continuity between ancient and contemporary composing styles and writing practices. In the Preface, Corbett notes how "the methods of learning to write have not changed very much since the Sophists first set up their schools of rhetoric in fifth-century Athens" (xi). Corbett assumes a pragmatic solidarity between the two groups, applauding ancient rhetors' refusal to be "impressed by the notion of **'creative self-expression'** until the student ha[s] a self to express and the facility for expressing it" (xi) [emphasis added]. If students are permitted to exercise "creative self-expression" at all in their work, he seems to imply, it should only be after they have first been trained in the classical mode.

And even then classical rhetoric becomes the appropriate vehicle for the articulation of creativity.

We may read Corbett's indictment of self expression (i.e., being "creative") as a writing mode equally as out-of-place and inappropriate to the formation of good writing practices for the student of the contemporary writing as it was for students of Attic Greece. If we read this passage from a hermeneutic stance--that is, if we situate this text within the larger political arena of competing composition pedagogies of the early 1960s--we may read in Corbett's words a criticism of the expressionistic methodologies espoused by his contemporaries Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Donald Murray.

In an article published two years before Classical Rhetoric entitled "The Usefulness of Classical Rhetoric," Corbett attempts to persuade his readers to return to the "rigorous, disciplined, system" of classical rhetoric in light of what he defines as the ineffectiveness of current methodologies:

> But hasn't the cult of self-expression had a fair chance to prove itself in the classroom? How many creative writers have we produced? . . . [W]hat most of our students need, even the bright ones, is careful systematized guidance at every step in the writing process. Classical rhetoric can provide that kind of guidance. (164)

Corbett denigrates expressionistic pedagogy on two counts. Above he decries its adherents as members of a factional group whose impact on writing instruction has seen its day. Second, Corbett seems to draw an imaginary division between what he sees as two very different kinds of writing as if to suggest that the

components valued in creative writing are not important to the kind of writing which takes place in a composition classroom.

In this illustration, a hermeneutic approach to Classical Rhetoric allows us to observe a not-so-subtle tension between classicists who seek to reclaim the field of writing instruction for their own over the more composer-centered approaches advocated by expressionist pedagogies. This reading also points up how strong was the influence of alternative methodologies during a period of composition instruction typically depicted as classically-oriented or still strongly influenced by current-traditionalism. Though conventional histories of composition often identify to the next decade as the stronghold for expressionistic theory--Macrorie's telling writing was published in 1970; Elbow's Writing Without Teachers in 1973--we see here embedded in the discourses of journal articles and student rhetorics the voices of alternative pedagogies also vying for a place in the composition classroom.

Another well established group--our research community--has produced narratives in the form of protocol analyses, empirical experiments, and ethnographic studies. These accounts can be said to function as historical narratives to the degree that they fulfill two significant functions: 1) they operate from an investigative focus whose explicit concern is the production and advancement of knowledge about composition; 2) they situate themselves within the field, building on and measuring themselves against the scholarship of their predecessors.

Braddock et al.'s Research in Written Composition (1963) has been referred to by Stephen North as "the charter of modern Composition" (17). The text was compiled as a response to public concern over how writing should be taught. In answer, the NCTE State of Knowledge About Composition committee united

> to review what is know and what is not known about the teaching and learning of composition and the conditions under which it is taught, for the purpose of preparing for publication a special **scientifically** based report on what is known in this area. (1) [emphasis added]

Narrowing their investigation to only those studies which dealt specifically with written composition, the group pooled over 1,000 citations from an extensive survey of research summaries, bibliographies, and individual unpublished studies (2). Through an initial screening process, 485 studies were then read and reviewed, resulting in the final five which represented "the most soundly based of all those studies available" (55).[1]

Yet there was resistance to subjecting composition to the principles of quantitative inquiry--resistance that is embedded in the text by a colleague whose name is significantly omitted. The skepticism is directed to one of the book's authors:

> What is the sense of attempting an elaborate empirical study if there is no chance of controlling the major elements in it? I think . . . that the further we get away from the peculiarities of the sentence, the less stable our 'research' becomes. I do not for that reason think that there should be no study and speculation about the conditions for teaching composition . . . but I do think that it is something of a mockery to organize these structures as though we were conducting a controlled experiment. (5)

The authors assert that the difficulty with composition research has been less a problem of the feasibility of applying scientific

principles to composition questions or the choice of appropriate subjects for study. Rather they argue that what is needed is more replication of the methodology, design, and rigor "one associates with the physical sciences" (5). We may note in this initial account an underlying argument for the efficacy and legitimacy of scientific method as a means to authorize composition research. What is significant here too is the development of a critical attitude toward research and the implied appropriation of the scientific ethos associated with it.

Yet if we read Research in Written Composition as a contemporaneous marker for "what is known and not known" about the discipline during the early 60s, the five studies outlined as "the most soundly based" are misleading. The studies profiled in Research become noteworthy not because of their currency (e.g., Smith's study dates from 1931, Kincaid's from 1953) but because they exemplify models of skilled scientific inquiry.[2] A hermeneutic approach invites us to look at what is not foregrounded such as the nameless scholar's critique described earlier as well as the research omitted, published as individual monographs, or marginalized to the text's bibliography. If we examine a sampling of these studies, we see evidences of scholarship in composition that shows traces of the same kinds of investigations which concerns us today: research which entails ethnographic approaches, writing-across-the-curriculum concerns, gender studies, and peer-group review of student writing.[3]

A hermeneutic reading also helps us to place the

significance of this text within a larger disciplinary issue concerning the nature and source of research knowledge. The objection voiced earlier about treating composition inquiry as a controlled experiment echoes this concern. For in valorizing empirical methodology as a guidepost for composition study, we see a displacement and marginalization of a sizable and invaluable source of knowledge--that of the practical knowledge supplied by classroom teachers whose instructional techniques, writing experience, and classroom observation fail to count as quantitative research.

Institutional histories are perhaps the newest form of historical narratives, claiming neither a heritage as old as that of classical accounts nor as firmly established as scientific inquiry. Yet perhaps because of the specialized nature of their examinations, they provide us with some of the most contextualized accounts of our discipline and are some of the most consciously historical documents we have. To a sharper degree than classical and scientific histories, they often incorporate a discussion of social and ideological factors into their analyses. In doing so, institutional histories highlight the ways in which composition is simultaneously shaped by and respond to changes within culture and within the academy.

Themes, Theories and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College is a review of Albert R. Kitzhaber's findings after his general study of college writing programs with particular emphasis on the conclusions he draws from his 1963 Dartmouth

Study of Student Writing. Kitzhaber offers Dartmouth as a standard to measure writing programs. He justifies his use of the school--an institution noted for high academic standards, economic stability, and selective enrollment--because "an English program suitable for the kind of student who comes to Dartmouth should be suitable also for a significant number of students at less selective institutions" (28).

Kitzhaber's surveys the "problem" of composition in all its facets: the adequacy of textbooks, methods of instruction, qualifications of instructors, and standards of English proficiency. As a historical document, Themes, Theories, and Therapies (1986) certainly is an example of the call for composition reform echoed in many texts published during the sixties. From a hermeneutic standpoint, however, if we read this work alongside other documents of the period such as the programs sessions of the annual CCCC meetings or consider the impact of such factors as the G.I. Bill on the changing face of student populations we begin to see the way in which much larger social, economic, and cultural factors also mediate, resist, and complicate the possibilities for composition reform present at the time.

A quick glance at some of the programs listings for CCCC sessions reveals some of the issues with which composition was grappling: "Obtaining, Training, and Keeping a Competent Staff" (1949); "The Growing Shortage of Composition/Communication Teachers: Some Possible Solutions" (1958); "Maintaining

Standards in Spite of Rising Enrollments" (1958). I would argue that a hermeneutic methodology allows us to recontextualize not only the way we regard Kitzhaber's study but the status of composition as well. For we see the way a study of a model school such as Dartmouth minimizes or avoids entirely some of the very bread-and-butter issues with which a great majority of composition departments struggled: teacher shortages and professional development, large class numbers, and quality education.

We should recall the publication of Themes, Theories, and therapies appears amidst the rise of the junior college system, begun as a way of managing the increase in college-bound students. When Kitzhaber holds up Dartmouth as a model for composition instruction in college, he assumes that what works well with small classes of well trained freshman will also hold true in classrooms twice as large and composed of students much less prepared.

While no historical account of our discipline is without its limitations, a hermeneutic model of composition makes a space for the dominant classical, naturalistic, and research narratives while demonstrating how sociopolitical and cultural influences also mediate a text. We see how marginalized works, contradictory findings, and open disagreements count. Moreover, a hermeneutic methodology recognizes the strategic role of the historian's interpretive presence, making us aware of the degree to which all historical narratives necessarily reflect the

interanimated influences of past texts and contemporary assumptions about them. In acknowledging the influences of received histories as well as those from noncanonical sources, a hermeneutic model asks finally that we rethink our own positions as historicized readers and writers and redirects us to the multivocal/multidimensional nature of the field that has come to be known as composition studies.

Notes

[1]The following criteria were used as a basis for selecting the final published studies: 1) the investigations were based at in part on direct observation of writing (as opposed to objective testing or questionnaires; 2) the studies included a test population of 20-80 students; 3) the tests contained a clear explication of testing procedures; 4) the studies relied on statistical analysis of data; and 5) the tests maintained as objective an investigation as possible (56).

[2]The five studies included Samuel L. Becker et al.'s "Communication Skills: An Experiment in Instructional Methods" (1958); Earl W. Buxton's "An Experiment to Test the Effects of Writing Frequency and Guided Practice Upon Students' Skill in Written Expression" (1958); Roland J. Harris' "An Experimental Inquiry into the Functions and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of English, with Special Reference to the Teaching of Correct English to Children Ages Twelve to Fourteen" (1962); Gerald L. Kincaid's "Some Factors Effecting Variations in the Quality of Students' Writing" (1953); and Doris V. Smith's "Class Size in High School English: Methods and Results" (1931).

[3]Studies such as the following from the bibliography of Research in Written Composition provide diversity in methodology and subjects of study, suggesting the kind of breadth we see in contemporary investigations of writing: Ralph Scrafford's "A Study of the Desirability of Correlating English Composition with Social Studies" [1953] (WAC); Paul E. Pendleton's "The Interdepartmental Teaching of English in College; Its Extent, Its Methods, and Its Possibilities" [1941] (WAC); James J. Lynch's "The Conference as a Method in the Teaching of English Composition in Junior-Senior High School" [1961] (Revision Pedagogy); Anthony S. Lis's "Attitudes and Practices of Executives and Secretaries Concerning Disputable Items of English Usage in Secretarial Handbooks" [1961] (Ethnography/Gender Studies); Jessie B. Chalifour's "The Effect of Training Students to Grade Compositions on Composition Work" [1937] (Peer Review); and Maurice L. Rider's "Advance Composition for Students in Engineering at Ohio State University: Evaluation and Proposals" [1950] (Business/Technical Writing).

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